

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Return of the chestnut

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Cradle of Forestry in America, in North Carolina's Transylvania County, was the site of the nation's first forestry school and you can still visit the one-room school house the students used.

It's appropriate then, that beside this schoolhouse is planted a young chestnut tree. The American chestnut was once the most abundant tree in Eastern hardwood forests, and was functionally eliminated by an Asian fungus, the chestnut blight. The tree beside the schoolhouse isn't a pure American chestnut, but a hybrid – 15/16ths American chestnut, and 1/16th Chinese chestnut, which affords it resistance to the blight. There's hope this hybrid is the key to returning the chestnut to Eastern forests.

Recent research out of Purdue University points to American chestnuts as a possible aid in fighting climate change. Although once a forest mainstay, the tree has been gone for so long that today foresters know very little about it. In studying American chestnut trees at a Wisconsin site where they escaped the blight, researcher Douglas Jacobs found the chestnuts grew faster and bigger than other hardwood species in similar forests, meaning they would be able to sequester carbon at a faster rate. He also pointed out that chestnut wood is typically used for longer-lasting products, like furniture, as opposed to paper and other short-lived items, meaning the carbon would be sequestered for longer.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peebles.